The Artful Practice Of Practicum Assessment

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This paper presents an overview of the findings from a study that sought to identify the power-knowledge regimes within which tertiary supervisors produce early childhood practicum assessment strategies. Surveillance, normalisation, confession, documentation and a consensual, democratic form of examination are the official practices of assessment sanctioned and legitimised by the practicum assessment documents. They are produced as possible and desirable within the meta-discourses of positivism and liberal humanism. It is from within these discourses that the tertiary supervisors construct their assessment practices. When I explored the tertiary supervisor's perspectives on practicum assessment what formed was a picture of assessment operating not as a logical, rational process but as a complex dynamic art, achieved by positioning within specific strands of liberal humanist discourse. The tertiary supervisors enacted the practices of surveillance and normalisation as they were required to do and enabled to do through the documents but not in a 'rational' (scientific) way. They practised them in a humanistic way; the surveillance and normalisation were artful, subtle and shifting, on themselves, the field supervisor and the student.

Introduction

The study reported on here explored tertiary supervisors' perceptions of the early childhood practicum assessment process. It sought to identify the power-knowledge regimes within which tertiary supervisors produce practicum assessment strategies, explore the discourses within which they understand and practise assessment and how power is exercised within those discourses. In this paper I focus on presenting and discussing the findings and my interpretation of them. It is not my intention to discuss implications for practice. The practicum supervision and assessment literature reviewed for this study has been presented elsewhere (see Ortlipp, 2002); therefore I begin with a very brief summary for the purpose of establishing a rationale for the study and justifying the choice of the theoretical (and methodological) lens used. Drawing on the poststructuralist literature, particularly the seminal work of Michel Foucault, I then outline the theoretical constructs used to analyse the data. The remainder of the paper presents key findings arising from the poststructuralist discourse analysis in relation to: 1) the official practices of practicum assessment produced in and through the institutional documents; 2) the discourses of the documents and how they contributed to the tertiary supervisors' understanding and practice of assessment; and 3) how the tertiary supervisors enacted practicum assessment in artful and strategic ways within these discourses.

Background and rationale for the study

The practicum is an integral and assessed component of tertiary early childhood courses, which in Australia are offered through Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and universities. The specific approach to assessment varies from institution to institution. Most commonly a combination of methods is used. For example, a modified clinical supervision method used in conjunction with competency based assessment (CBA) which is carried out through a triadic assessment process (Fleet, 1993; MacNaughton, 1991; Mulcahy, 1996; Swinburne University of Technology, 2000). In some instances CBA used in conjunction with a criterion-referenced grading system is used (Webster & Byrne, 1994). All the institutions that the tertiary supervisors in this study worked for utilised the approach that combined modified clinical supervision, CBA and triadic assessment. Those who supervised university students had also used criterion-referenced grading in combination with the above approach.

My review of the literature revealed a very limited amount of research dealing specifically with assessment of the early childhood practicum and no Australian or international research that focused on the role of the tertiary supervisor in the practicum in early childhood courses. In addition, the research literature around assessment practices, particularly the assessment of practical performance using competencies, is concerned with the postivist notions of validity and reliability, and measuring and

quantifying learning, with a focus on efficiency and outcomes (McAllister, 1999). The dominant discourses in the assessment research literature are positivist and liberal humanist discourses within which it is possible and desirable to implement rational, valid and objective assessment processes and achieve reasonable, responsible, democratic and fair assessments.

Although the gaps in the practicum assessment literature suggested that a study focusing on early childhood practicum assessment from the tertiary supervisors' perspective may provide some new insights and potential for change and improvement, I did not want to simply reproduce what appeared to be repetitive findings and recommendations. The traditional literature could not explain why and how practicum assessment has come to be practised in the way that it is. For me, as a tertiary supervisor who was using competency-based assessment methods which were implemented through a triadic assessment process, Foucualt's notion of disciplinary power (1991) with its techniques of hierarchical observation (surveillance), normalisation, documentation and confession was compelling. I saw the potential of using these concepts for analysing the data in my study and, thus, a way of coming to understand practicum assessment, and tertiary supervisors' understanding and practice of this process, in a different way than had been made possible through the traditional literature.

Methodology and conceptual framework

The methodology for this study has been reported on elsewhere (Ortlipp, 2002), therefore the focus in this section is on the conceptual framework. In summary, seventeen tertiary supervisors participated in the study. They supervised and assessed TAFE and/or university early childhood students. The range of experience in practicum supervision was from two to eighteen years. All participants were qualified early childhood teachers at degree level or above. Only one of the participants was male. Data were generated through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and reflective journals and email conversations. Interviews were transcribed and through this process transformed into text suitable for a poststructuralist discourse analysis. Practicum assessment forms and practicum policy and procedure documents provided to the tertiary supervisors by the institutions that they worked for were additional forms of data collected for the purpose of analysis. These included the requirements for students and the role and responsibility of the tertiary supervisor. The assessment forms included the competencies to be achieved, and criteria and standards for judging the achievement of competency. All the textual data were analysed using a conceptual framework that drew primarily on Foucauldian poststructuralist constructs, for example, discourse, subjectivity, power-knowledge and technologies of power.

Foucualt (1982) proposes that power is a relationship in which one individual (or group) seeks to direct the actions of another. Power, therefore is not possessed, rather it is exercised. It is a productive force, producing reality, objects, subjects, discourses and truth (Foucault, 1980, 1991). Power depends on knowledge in that in order to exercise power, knowledge must be used (Foucault, 2000). According to Foucault (1991) disciplinary knowledge is produced and exercised through specific techniques that he referred to as "technologies of power". These involve surveillance and normalisation (which together constitute an examination), documentation and confession. The exercise of power is only possible in and through the actions of the subjects constituted by the knowledges and discourses that power produces. Thus, it is individuals (or groups) that exercise power through the technologies of power.

Weedon (1987) claims that, "Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects" (p. 110). The constitution of subjectivity is therefore an exercise of power. Subjectivity is the "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). An individual's sense of self, from a poststructuralist perspective, is formed as the individual participates in the discourses available and to which they have access. Individuals constitute their subjectivity as they speak and act from within these discourses.

Discourses are systems of knowledge, often institutionally based, that act as the truth according to which individuals understand the world and their life in that world (MacNaughton, 2000). They provide norms, values, principles, rules and standards that act as truths upon which a range of subjectivities are constituted, particular practices are formed and privileged and relationships of power are produced. Discourses are systems of possibility. They make it possible to think, speak and act in some ways and not others, and they determine who can speak, when, how, and with what authority (Ball, 1990).

Using these understandings the aim was to identify the discourses that were produced and reproduced in and through the documents and the tertiary supervisors' talk. I focused on the patterns and regularities in the language of the documents and in how tertiary supervisors spoke about themselves and the

practicum assessment process, and the values and beliefs expressed in and through the documents and the tertiary supervisors' words. When I examined the data, I explored how the documents provide for the possibility of the exercise of power through surveillance, normalisation, documentation and confession. I looked for examples of when, how and why tertiary supervisors took up these techniques of power, modified them and/or produced their own specific strategies of assessment, and used them to exercise power in the practicum assessment process.

In what follows I present a discussion of the findings in the three areas outlined in the introduction. I draw on the voices of several tertiary supervisors (including my own) to illustrate the findings. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality. Joan, Bron, Tegan, Mary, Louise and Kieran were employed full-time as teachers in TAFE-based early childhood courses. Supervision of the practicum was part of their teaching role. Ingrid and Evelyn were employed as practicum supervisors on a casual basis by various TAFE institutions and universities. Nola, Olivia and Glenys were employed as associate (casual) supervisors for one university, but Olivia had previous experience with TAFE students. The voices of Nola and Tegan are featured more often as their examples capture the nuances that are typical of the tertiary supervisors' approach and style.

The official practices of practicum assessment

The way that early childhood practicum assessment is to be organised and carried out is outlined in the practicum handbooks and policy and procedure manuals that are provided to students, field supervisors and tertiary supervisors. According to these documents, the practicum assessment process involves the tertiary supervisor in specific practices aimed at producing knowledge about the student, for the purpose of making a judgement about that student's achievement. Analysis of the documents using the conceptual framework outlined above showed that the practices produced in and through the documents and enacted by tertiary supervisors can be understood as technologies of power: specific micro-practices, or local practices, linked with surveillance, normalisation, documentation and confession. Organising the visit, observing the student and checking the written work involve indirect and direct surveillance by the tertiary supervisor — these are practices of surveillance. Recording examples of students' progress against the competencies and providing feedback use the knowledge produced through surveillance to document the student's progress against specific standards or norms — these are practices of documentation and normalisation. Discussing the student's progress and achievement involves a process of normalisation, because the discussion is focused on achievement of the competencies or norms for the practicum — it is a practice of normalisation. The triadic discussion functions as a confessional in which the student provides verbal and written evidence of her achievement or non-achievement of the competencies — it is a practice of confession. Making a judgement is a practice of normalisation: it is a judgement that is made against the competencies to be achieved, the norms for the practicum, and thus, it is a normalising judgement. In this way, the practices that the documents construct are specific techniques of power, that parallel Foucault's (1991) technologies of power — surveillance, normalisation, documentation, confession.

The institutional documents produce and circulate knowledge about practicum assessment and how it is enacted. In providing rules and norms for all participants in the assessment process the institutional documents function as a discourse. The practices that the documents produce are possible and desirable within postivist and liberal humanist discourses. For example, within a positivist discourse surveillance is the logical and correct way to get to the truth about the student's progress and achievement. The surveillance that goes on in practicum assessment, according to the documents, is also possible and desirable within a liberal humanist discourse because all three participants carry it out equally. The practice of normalisation and the enactment of a normalising judgement based on official norms (for example, the *Child Care National Competency Standards* or the *Framework for Beginning Teaching* which are utilised in the report forms) is right and proper from within a positivist discourse. The collaborative and consensual form of normalisation used in the triadic assessment achieves the humanist ideals of democracy and equality and is therefore produced as desirable from within liberal humanist discourses. When the tertiary supervisors enact the practices of the documents, they take up and use these techniques of power. In doing so, they are positioned and position themselves as objective observers, collaborative examiners, and judges and as they speak and act from these positions, they mobilise the discourses of positivism and liberal humanism.

The discourses of the documents and tertiary supervisors' practices

The tertiary supervisors' understanding and practice of the practicum assessment process has been (at least in part) constructed in and through the documents and the discourse(s) that those documents produce and reproduce. The purpose of surveillance, documentation and confession, according to the documents, is to produce knowledge that can then be used to make an accurate, objective, valid, normalising judgement of the student's progress and achievement. The tertiary supervisors engaged in these practices. Their words expressed a belief in the logical processes set out in the documents and a desire for standards and guidelines. For example, Joan and Bron expressed faith in the process of surveillance and normalisation that the documents set up for assessing the student's achievement:

> If the students are documenting very real practical ways in which they are demonstrating a particular element of competency, if the workplace supervisor will comment on specific things, and if we go in and see it too, and if a student gets a variety of children's services, with workplace supervisors who are commenting on what the student's performance is, I think that maybe, in the end, we're getting a pretty fair judgement of the student's capabilities. (Joan, FG3)
>
> If you've got the competency book, the checklist, or whatever you want to call it, at least we know what we're supposed to be looking for. (Bron, FG1)

And as Evelyn's words below suggest, the documents also provided norms for the tertiary supervisors' practice:

> I need parameters to work by. I need guidelines to work by, not only from the point of view that I'm doing the right thing but also that there is still the general trend being followed by a group of people who are individuals within the system. So it's a quality control mechanism as well (INT7).

While the tertiary supervisors enacted practicum assessment according to the documents they expressed some doubts about following the template, and at times they stepped outside it. They applied their own techniques and used their own style as they went about the practicum assessment process. Kieran, for example, explained:

> I walk in and I assess the student overall, and I have a sense as to whether the student's doing all right or not. And then I'll go back to use those indicators to indicate the areas that they're not meeting and the areas that they are meeting. So I actually do it the other way around. I make a holistic judgement. I think that it is stuff that competencies break it all down to, but you actually still need to look at them as a whole. (FG3)

Practicum assessment went beyond the format prescribed by the documents; beyond the rational and logical practices of organising and preparing for the visit, observing, checking, recording, providing feedback, discussing students' progress and making a judgement. It was, as Kieran put it, "an opportunity to assess how they're feeling in terms of the workplace communication stuff" (FG3). According to Evelyn, "You go in and you get that overall feel of what's actually happening" (FG4). Thus the visit was not just about surveillance, it was about getting a "feel" for how things were going beyond the requirements. These comments suggest that tertiary supervisors infer what is going on based on what they observe, find out indirectly, and feel. To do this they can't just observe the student and his/her practice. The tertiary supervisors' observations were not only focused on student practice against the competencies, or on whether or not the bookwork was adequate; they took in the whole situation — personalities, feelings and interactions. Practicum assessment was not only, or necessarily, an objective application of official norms; many tertiary supervisors interpreted the norms creatively and strategically and used their professional judgement based on their own subjective professional norms rather than the "objective" performance criteria. Ingrid, for instance, admitted:

> We make the interpretation, I suppose ... It's not written there — I mean, we can't say it's there in black and white. Our professionalism and our experience make that decision. (FG4)

According to Mary and Glenys, it is possible to "tell" what is going on, the tertiary supervisor can intuit, interpret and infer:

> I think, as an experienced tertiary supervisor, you can just tell. Like you go in there and, immediately, you can see whether somebody really has their heart in it or not. (Mary, INT3)
>
> You can usually tell — the way the children respond to somebody is fairly telling — you can usually tell if somebody's getting on. You can usually tell if something positive's happening — well, you're pretty sure that that's alright. (Glenys, INT5)

I gained the impression that there was an art to practicum assessment and that it was much more complex than carrying out each step in the process according to the documents. The tertiary supervisors' practice of practicum assessment was artful and strategic.

Enacting practicum assessment: the tertiary supervisors' artful practices

Surveillance, normalisation, documentation, confession and a consensual, democratic form of examination were the practices that actualised the relations of power operating in the early childhood practicum assessment process that this study investigated. These practices are produced as appropriate and desirable within the meta-discourses of positivism and liberal humanism, and were taken up and enacted by tertiary supervisors as subjects of these discourses. However, the practice of practicum assessment through such technologies of power was not achieved without shifts, ruptures and transformations. There were contradictions and resistances. The tertiary supervisors held contradictory beliefs about how to produce the truth about a student's competence and suitability for the field. For example, they believed that competency based assessment (CBA) provided benchmarks that enabled them to achieve a more objective assessment, but they were also suspicious of the promise of objectivity. Tegan, for example, believed that she should be objective in her assessment of the student, however at the same time she was not sure it was possible or in fact desirable, as her comments below indicate:

> You have to go in there being quite as objective as you can, but being really careful that you're not taking too much of your opinion and your values into that assessment.
>
> I don't know how to get around that [taking your own values and using your own judgement] ... I don't know if there is a way because you're always going to take some of yourself into it. And I think if you didn't, you know, I don't know what sort of a teacher you'd be if you didn't ... (INT10)

Others felt that they could achieve a fairer assessment if they knew the student outside of the practicum situation. For example, before Mary went out to visit a student she liked to "know what they're like in class, and as a person". She felt that it was fairer because she was "looking at the big picture, the whole person, rather than just going in and getting a three hour glimpse of one person and judging on that one visit" (INT2). It was not only background knowledge about the student that was used to ensure fairness. For example, when Louise was faced with a field supervisor who was known to be difficult with students she determined to "support the student in fairness" (INT 2).

These beliefs and practices have been constructed in and through the discourses of progressive education and early childhood education. Although derived from humanist and liberal humanist discourses they provide different sets of rules by which the "truth" is produced (Foucault, 1991): the truth about the student's achievement and the truth about how to be a teacher (or tertiary supervisor). Within these discourses education is holistic, fair and equitable. It is desirable to know the individual and their unique situation and the teacher is a caring and nurturing. The tertiary supervisors practised assessment and exercised power artistically and artfully, creatively and strategically in and through these discourses. They produced specific strategies of assessment that functioned as techniques of power. I have called these techniques detailed inquiry, holistic surveillance, inference, interpretation, discretion, individualisation and regulation. The analysis showed that all of the supervisors enacted at least one and more often each of these particular strategies. Most strongly evident in the data were holistic surveillance, interpretation, inference and discretion.

Detailed inquiry

The tertiary supervisors sought to establish the "truth" about students by finding out about the whole situation, the "big picture" as many referred to it. They asked those who were regarded as knowledgeable about the student — the practicum coordinator, the field supervisor and at times the student herself. Nola, whose strategies and style were typical of the tertiary supervisors' practice of this technique, contacted the practicum coordinator to ask how the student was progressing in the theory classes. During the visit she asked the field supervisor subtle and indirect questions which sought to discover how much help the field supervisor was providing for the student. For example, "Had you talked to her about what your current planning was to help?" and "I wonder how she'd [the student] get that information or idea". Knowledge of the student was thus produced through a detailed inquiry that went beyond the practicum context. According to Nola, "You have to, I think, take a full view just to find out if there is a personality problem or something ..." (INT9).

Holistic surveillance

The tertiary supervisors' surveillance involved a gaze that took in more than just the student: their practice was linked to a "network of gazes" (Foucualt, 1991, p. 171). It extended beyond the student to the field supervisor and the children. As Nola explained, "You have to be aware of each of their personalities, how they're interacting, and how the teacher is feeling about the student" (FG2). The tertiary supervisors observed the field supervisor, her practice and her interactions with the student. For example, Ingrid explained that sometimes when visiting a student she would be able to see that the situation was not suiting the student, that sometimes "a field supervisor [is] not flexible…is not prepared to listen to who the student is" (FG4). Similarly, Nola's surveillance also took in the field supervisor. When she visited the student Nola observed that the field supervisor was "a good teacher in groups, a good example to the student" (INT 9), but she was not giving effective feedback to the student about her planning. Nola and Glenys both observed the children's reactions to the student. Nola said, "You can tell a great deal from the children, the children's reactions. That's very important in assessment" (FG2), and for Glenys also, "the way children respond is fairly telling" (FG4).

Inference

The tertiary supervisors used the "big picture", the "full view", which detailed inquiry and holistic surveillance produced, to interpret what they saw and heard and used it as the basis for drawing inferences. Inference is a way of seeing and understanding what is going on, and in this way, it can be understood as a technique of surveillance, a creative practice of surveillance. Using the technique of inference, tertiary supervisors extract knowledge about the student and the situation and use this knowledge to guide them in their actions and decisions — to exercise power. For example, Louise's surveillance during a visit revealed that "there just wasn't communication" between the student and the field supervisor. Based on her holistic surveillance she inferred that "a lot of it came down to a personality situation ... almost a personality clash", and she sought to act upon the field supervisor's future actions toward the student by saying to the field supervisor, "that student needs support" (INT 2). Other examples come from Nola and Glenys, who both used their observations of the children's responses to students to infer how well the student was progressing. The knowledge produced through these inferences was used as part of the evidence generated about the student's level of competence. Nola used the evidence that she had of "all the negative things [the field supervisor] said about the student" to infer that she was not "encouraging or helping that girl"(INT9).

Interpretation

The technique of interpretation was used by the tertiary supervisors to make the subjective appear objective. They interpreted the official norms — the competencies — creatively and strategically. For example, when Tegan found that there was "something not quite right" with a student's performance, but it was "just a feeling" rather than something rational and capable of being observed and objectively identified, she believed she had to "pin it down to a competency". However, as she said, "There's usually somewhere in that form that you can slot that in, and say this student hasn't met competency" (INT10). Others engaged with this technique, as is evident in Ingrid's comment (cited earlier) where she admits that there is nothing in black and white, the tertiary supervisor has to interpret. Evelyn interpreted a competency quite broadly when she believed a student had not had the opportunity to demonstrate it. She admitted that in order to "fulfil that, to tick it off in other words [I] would manipulate it because the physical circumstances were not possible" (INT7).

Interpretation draws on the norms held and produced by the tertiary supervisors in and through their own professional experience. The tertiary supervisors had their own ideas about what should be demonstrated as an early childhood student and future professional. For example, they talked about attributes such as "warmth", "care", "commitment" and "initiative". Mary wanted to see that they "had their heart in it" (INT3), and for Olivia "good practice means caring about what's fair and what's equitable" (INT8). These were difficult things to express in competencies and thus the tertiary supervisors, in order to uphold their standards; their "bottom line" as Ingrid referred to it, used the technique of interpretation. In this way interpretation is a technique of power that makes it possible to 'extract [interpret] knowledge and constitute knowledge' (Foucault, 1991, p. 185) and to exercise power through making a normalising judgement.

Discretion

Evelyn's interpretation of the competencies as discussed above links with the technique of discretion. She used her discretion to overlook a requirement she believed could not be achieved. This was a consistent practice among the tertiary supervisors. Discretion was used in order to allow the tertiary supervisors to achieve fairness. For example, Joan was prepared to overlook certain requirements when she checked the student's bookwork because she "had that feeling that she was doing her best and she wasn't achieving within that environment, and I think that was fair on the student. I think we have to be fair" (INT1). Joan interpreted the situation, made an inference and employed the technique of discretion. She exercised the power to enact a fair assessment, to deem the student competent despite incomplete work.

When the tertiary supervisors' observations indicated that the centre practice was a poor role model they used their discretion and overlooked relatively minor instances of undesirable practice on the part of the student. As a tertiary supervisor I recorded in my own reflective journal:

> In triadic assessments, I can also make allowances for some things students may be doing in their program that would not be what I had taught but would be something the centre wanted done. (1996)

Discretion draws on knowledge produced through the practices of detailed inquiry, holistic surveillance and inference. It is linked with the technique of individualisation which tertiary supervisors used to respond to individual circumstances and situations in order to achieve fairness. In this way it can be understood as a technique of power: it is a way of exercising the power to produce a fair assessment, a fair tertiary supervisor and a competent student.

Individualisation

The tertiary supervisors individualised their assessments rather than sticking rigidly to the template provided by the documents. This is evident in the above examples. Often the individualisation was in response to knowledge gained by way of detailed inquiry, holistic surveillance and inference and it was achieved through interpretation and discretion. For example, Tegan allowed a student to pass a placement despite the fact that key elements of the written work were incomplete because the student had struggled on in the face of a major personal crisis, and it was a first placement. In another situation she allowed a student to pass a placement even though the field supervisor had given the student two NC grades (not competent) for two elements of competence. As Tegan explained:

> We certainly look at each individual student on their own merit; so we would never say, "Two NCs, that's it". We look at which NCs they are ... and the situation surrounding that. (INT10)

Regulation

While the tertiary supervisors used individualisation and discretion: techniques that enabled them to achieve a fair assessment, they often tempered their discretion by using the technique of regulation. Gore (2002) defines regulation as "controlling by rule, subject to restrictions; adapt to requirements; act of invoking a rule" (p. 7). Tegan's discretionary decisions and individualised assessments as outlined above were "subject to restrictions", and the students had to "adapt to requirements". For example, despite allowing the students to pass the practicum she was careful to write on one of the student's work what needed to be done, and "gave her clear dates for that to happen, what was outstanding, what had to come in" (INT 10). In the case of the other student, the NCs she was allowed to carry into the next practicum had to be converted to CAs at the first visit.

Regulation is a technique of normalisation because it "invokes a rule" and the rule functions as a norm, a norm that guides practice. The tertiary supervisors are also "subject to restrictions" through the official documents that require them to act in particular ways and through the rules that they produce for themselves. These rules required Tegan to "look at each student on their own merit" and not to fail a student simply because she had two NCs. However, regulation also enabled the tertiary supervisors to exercise the power to uphold official standards, to ensure that in the end the student does complete the work and achieve the required competencies.

In summary

The tertiary supervisors' artful practice of assessment involved the use of specific techniques of surveillance — detailed inquiry, holistic surveillance, and inference — an artful surveillance. These produced knowledge about the students, their progress and achievement in relation to the practicum requirements and competencies, as specified in the documents. These artful practices also produced

knowledge about the student outside of the practicum context, knowledge of the field supervisor, the practicum setting and the overall situation. The tertiary supervisors used this knowledge; they extracted it, appropriated it and applied it (Foucault, 2000) in the visit and the triadic assessment, and the effect was a subtle, careful, strategic, invisible exercise of power. Their creative and strategic practice of assessment involved the use of specific techniques of normalisation — interpretation, discretion, individualisation and regulation. These produced a normalising judgement that appeared to be based on the competencies and requirements (norms) set out in the documents, however, it was based on the tertiary supervisors' norms and expectations for appropriate early childhood practice, and guided by the principles of fairness, support and responsibility. These artful and strategic practices of assessment are produced within discourses of early childhood practicum assessment that privilege positivist concepts of rationality, validity and objectivity, and liberal humanist ideas such as reason, responsibility, democracy and fairness. Through the artful practice of practicum assessment, the tertiary supervisors were able to position themselves as the fair, reasonable, rational, responsible subjects of liberal humanist discourses (specifically progressivism and early childhood education), but also as the independent, objective investigators and assessors within the discourse of positivism.

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Virtual Teachers: Negotiating New Spaces For Teaching Bodies

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In 2002 the authors reviewed the educational and technical performance of the Virtual Schooling Service (VSS) during its first two years of operation in 2000–2001 (Pendergast & Kapitzke, 2004; Pendergast, Kapitzke, Land, Luke, & Bahr, 2002). The VSS provided by Education Queensland utilises synchronous and asynchronous online delivery strategies and a range of learning technologies to support students at a distance (see http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/service/virtual/). The service commenced in the year 2000 with a focus on senior secondary subjects. At present there are over 500 students in almost 80 schools across the state enrolled in 8 subjects. In response to the recommendations of the study, a series of professional development activities were conducted with the VSS teachers by the authors. This included a focus on the development of pedagogical innovations relevant for VSS teachers, utilising the Productive Pedagogies as a platform. Following this, skills around critical reflection were introduced, including consideration of the ways in which the teachers were developing as a learning community. Some data were collected from the teachers in order to develop an understanding of how the VSS teachers construct themselves. This included visual representations. This paper reports on the ways in which VSS teachers constructed themselves.

Introduction

The shift to online educational services is part of the Smart State policy agenda, which seeks to make the state a key player in the global information economy. Education Queensland's Virtual Schooling Service (VSS) initiative was established as part of that broad agenda and as a response to the 1999 report, *Application of New Technologies to Enhance Learning Outcomes for All Students.* This report confirmed that traditional print-based distance education delivery approaches fell short of delivering access to the kinds of cultural capital required for participation in knowledge economies, and that subject choice and learning outcomes for students who are geographically isolated, or unable to access school subjects locally, needed addressing.

Virtual learning environments like VSS provide rich and largely untapped pedagogical spaces for research on the question of teaching and learning as embodied and agentive practice. Online initiatives like VSS are typically viewed as test-beds for curricular and pedagogical innovations that feed back into and inform conventional classroom cultures and practices. There is, then, a sense that online teaching and learning environments are important and productive sites for rethinking longstanding educational curricula, pedagogy, and assessment.

This paper applies a social semiotic approach to a corpus of written and visual texts, which are constructions of the professional identities of 25 teachers of the VSS who work solely in an online mode. It raises a number of questions about schools today and what they might become in the future. Some of the issues it canvasses are, how does virtual schooling enable and constrain how teachers think about and construct themselves as professionals? What does "going virtual" mean for the "school" to which they belong? How can schools be imagined and practiced differently to better reflect and connect with the highly complex and differentiated times and spaces of fast capitalism?

Teaching as embodied and embedded practice

Three decades ago, social theorists and feminist philosophers rejected the classical Platonic binary separating the mind from the body and privileging the former over the latter (cf., Grosz, 1994). Research today largely conceives teaching as embodied social and discursive practice, and argues that people adopt, construct, and enact certain identities through social interaction and relationships. Feminist and poststructuralist theories, in particular, have reframed conceptions of teaching and learning by foregrounding the body in teaching as a discursive construction (cf., Berzonsky & Adams, 1999;